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**MIDDLE EAST STUDIES PROGRAM**

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**Revolution, Counter-Revolution, and Hezbollah:  
Lebanese Discourse and the “Party of God” Following the October Uprising**

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The outbreak of the October 2019 uprising in Lebanon has brought to the surface deep-seated grievances among various segments of the Lebanese population against the government, the ruling political class, the sectarian political system, the political economy, and their broader failures. The protests were sparked and perpetuated by a series of unprecedented events caused by the political system's systematic corruption and the country's dire financial situation. In the beginning stages of the popular uprising, protesters seemed to overcome political and religious differences, coming together to oppose all political parties. However, as the protests progressed, internal political actors began denouncing the uprising or trying to use the movement to their advantage, causing some protesters to return to their previous political affiliations or end their participation in the demonstrations. Despite widespread discontent against all establishment parties, the protests had varied impacts on the political system as a whole and internal dynamics within the various sectarian parties.

Throughout Lebanon's series of unprecedented crises and recent struggles, Hezbollah, as one of the country's most powerful political forces, has featured prominently with its opposition to the protests and deepened involvement in the Lebanese government. To better understand the result of the October 17 uprisings on the Lebanese public's perception of the political system, this capstone project focuses on Hezbollah, a party that has become increasingly entrenched in the domestic political system and yet is often portrayed by Western media and anti-Hezbollah opponents as a terrorist organization, framing the party as an exceptional actor with ties to regional powers that require it to be understood outside of the Lebanese political system. This limited analysis often undermines the reality of Hezbollah's influence within the sectarian political system, the economy, and among the Lebanese people and the ability to understand its domestic power as both a political party and "resistance" movement.

This project seeks to answer how the October uprising and its aftermath affected discourse towards Hezbollah among various segments of the Lebanese population, not only among its supporters but also its various political opponents, activists, public figures, and other segments of the Lebanese population. The October uprising and Lebanon's financial crisis have opened up a new space for criticism against Hezbollah and its position within the political establishment, as evidenced by increasingly critical discourse against the group, even among some allies and supporters. At the same time, instability throughout Lebanon's multiple crises continues to drive sectarian loyalties among many Hezbollah supporters and other party loyalists. Overall, the discourse reflects new tensions with Hezbollah's position among the elites, rather than the "oppressed" it claims to represent, and broader tensions with Lebanon's sectarian political system, stemming from a widening divide between political and economic elites and the population under the "all of them means all them"<sup>1</sup> dynamic.

## **2.0 Background**

### *2.1 Turmoil in Lebanon*

Protests broke out on October 17 in direct response to proposals to implement a tax on popular messaging app WhatsApp, a normally free service, epitomizing for many Lebanese the government's corruption, mismanagement, and exploitation of an increasingly impoverished population. Simmering grievances associated with these problems spurred the outbreak of the largest protests Lebanon has seen since the 2005 Cedar Revolution with Lebanese from all over the country taking part, from Beirut to Baalbek, Tripoli to Nabatieh, Akkar to Tyre, and other parts of the country. Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation on October 29 pushed the ruling political class back into a familiar state of complex negotiations and infighting that has repeatedly fueled political gridlock since the country's founding. This gridlock paralyzed Lebanon as years of economic mismanagement and neoliberal policies pushed the country into a deep financial crisis, sharpening poverty and inequality as the Lebanese lira crashed in value. The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exacerbated the economic decline and eventually led to extreme pressure on the health system and population, who faced multiple stringent lockdowns and the burden of the government's failure to address the multi-faceted challenges facing the country. By the end of 2020, Lebanon's economy had contracted around 19%, poverty increased to around 45% of the population, and inflation reached triple-digits.<sup>2</sup> The height of the government's failures was reflected in the Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020 that decimated parts of Beirut, serving as an extreme example of the government's gross negligence, corruption, mismanagement, and disregard for the Lebanese population.

### *2.2 Hezbollah's Evolution*

Before examining Hezbollah's role in the current moment, it is important to understand how the party and militant group has evolved over the years. Hezbollah, "the party of God," emerged in the early 1980s amid Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990) in response to Israel's 1982 invasion and following the political mobilization of the historically marginalized Shia population in the 1960s and 1970s, characterized by Imam Musa Sadr and the founding of his "Amal" movement, along with the rising influence of Shia clerics like Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah. Hezbollah was officially established in 1985 as an Islamic political group whose founders sought to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon inspired by Iran and the 1979 Islamic Revolution, initially rejecting participation in Lebanon's sectarian political system.<sup>3</sup> Its founding documents feature aspects of Islamic liberation theology focused on countering social injustice and oppression. The group also focused on armed resistance against Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon that enabled it to develop "a reputation for professionalism and competence" for its success in operations against Israel, who eventually withdrew from the vast majority of southern Lebanon in 2000 (except for the Shebaa Farms), providing a significant boost to Hezbollah's credibility as a resistance movement.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon further cemented Hezbollah's standing, power, and influence within Lebanon.

Hezbollah's recognition of the 1989 Ta'if Agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war marked a turning point for the group, which altered its political strategy alongside the agreement's recalibration of the sectarian political system. Most importantly, the agreement classified Hezbollah as a resistance movement, rather than a militia, enabling it to keep its arms, while other militias were forced to disband and disarm but remained political parties.<sup>5</sup> Following Ta'if, Hezbollah shifted its political strategy to gradually participate and integrate into the political system with its decision to take part in legislative and municipal elections from 1992 onward. The party dominated elections in Shia-populated areas like southern Lebanon, the southern suburbs of Beirut, and the Bekaa Valley. In addition to its successes in the resistance against Israel, the party was boosted by efforts to appeal to the Shia popular masses with the expansion of charitable, medical, and educational activities largely funded by Iran.<sup>6</sup> This began during the civil war and eventually expanded into a sprawling network of social services in Shia-populated areas independent from the state.

The assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 and the subsequent popular mobilization, known as the Cedar Revolution, that pushed Syria's withdrawal created a new political divide between what came to be known as the March 8 and March 14 Coalitions. Hezbollah has led the March 8 Coalition alongside the Amal Movement, the Free Patriotic Movement, and other pro-Syrian groups, while the March 14 Coalition is led by Saad Hariri's Future Movement and has typically included the Christian Lebanese Forces and Kataeb parties and Walid Joumblatt's movement, the Progressive Socialist Party. Despite the divide, the parties have formed coalition governments since 2005, with intermittent periods of political gridlock. With Syria's withdrawal, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah announced the party's decision to fully integrate within Lebanese political, economic, and administrative life with its participation in all government institutions, including the cabinet.<sup>7</sup> Since then, the party has held at least two cabinet seats in each government and has significantly deepened its political influence and hand in decision making, particularly after the 2008 crisis, often referred to as "May 7." The crisis marked the first time Hezbollah had used its weapons against Lebanese national actors since the civil war, escalating political concerns over the status of the party's weapons.<sup>8</sup> These concerns deepened with the militia's entrance into the Syrian civil war in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime towards the end of 2011 - a controversial move from the perspective of many actors in Lebanon who viewed Hezbollah as utilizing its weapons once again for purposes outside of the resistance against Israel.

Hezbollah's expanding position as part of the political establishment has influenced its reaction to successive popular uprisings within Lebanon prior to 2019. The outbreak of the "Arab Spring" across the region in 2011 produced protests inside Lebanon calling for an end to the sectarian regime, but like other political forces, Hezbollah urged its members not to participate. The party also opposed the "You Stink" movement in the summer of 2015 triggered by a trash crisis that expanded into a series of demonstrations against the sectarian political system. While rhetorically supportive of some of the protesters' demands, Nasrallah ultimately questioned the leadership and objectives of the movement in rhetoric that has featured prominently in the latest uprising. In the end, the party, alongside the rest of the ruling political class, attempted to co-opt and end the movement.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is no surprise that Hezbollah moved to oppose the latest and most significant popular uprising yet against the sectarian regime and ruling political class in the October 17 uprising.

### *2.3 Hezbollah and the October 17 Uprising*

Since the unprecedented uprising on October 17, 2019, Hezbollah has taken on the role of leading the counter-revolution and holding the line for the ruling political class with its decision to come out strongly against the uprising early on. After seeing the broad-based mobilization across the country that included the party's constituencies, Nasrallah gave two speeches on October 19 and 25, 2019 that cemented its role in the counter-revolution, stating clearly that the party opposes a change in government and that any such scenario would push the country into chaos.<sup>10</sup> He insinuated that political opponents and foreign governments were already exploiting the protest movement in its first week and questioned the leaderless nature of the movement, ultimately calling on his supporters to withdraw from the streets.

Despite Hezbollah's opposition, Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned on October 29, leaving the party at the helm of organizing efforts to form a new government alongside its allies, the Amal Movement and President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. Ultimately, Hassan Diab was tasked with forming a "technocratic" government, but the party's political opponents and international critics rejected Diab as leading "Hezbollah's government." The protest movement also saw through the government's formation, accusing Diab and the cabinet of serving the interests of sectarian parties under the false label of technocrats. Hezbollah's role in forming the government was the culmination of years of expanding involvement in Lebanese politics after wholly rejecting participation in the sectarian political system upon the group's founding, leading to its eventual status as the most powerful political party in the country with a high degree

of control within the government. With the deepening financial crisis and prolonged political instability as protests continued, the Diab government faced a series of crises from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, to Lebanon's first-ever default on its debt, to the Beirut port explosion. All of these events fueled greater scrutiny and criticism towards Hezbollah, who helped to keep the sectarian political system afloat in cooperation with the rest of the ruling political class.

## **3.0 Literature Review**

### *3.1 Placing Our Argument in the Literature*

This project seeks to build on critical analyses of Lebanon's political and economic system and existing literature on Hezbollah's position in Lebanon to provide an academic contribution to how the October 17 uprising, the financial crisis, and the country's other contemporary challenges have influenced Hezbollah's standing. This analysis reveals inherent tensions with Hezbollah's position in the country among both its supporters and opponents related to the party's role in leading the counter-revolution and upholding the sectarian system, despite deepening public discontent and socioeconomic deterioration. While focused on Hezbollah, analysis of discourse towards the group reflects broader tensions with Lebanon's consociational power-sharing system and how parties like Hezbollah view a cross-sectarian movement like that which emerged on October 17 as an existential threat, which explains their swift response to counter the movement. At the same time, the analysis adds to previous works looking at the manipulation of sectarian identity by Lebanon's political parties, including Hezbollah, to sustain their political and economic power – the essence of the counter-revolution and consociational power-sharing system.

This project stands in contrast to literature that exceptionalizes Hezbollah or views it solely as a non-state actor, a terrorist group, or simply a proxy of Iran. While there are definitely exceptional aspects to Hezbollah's operations and position inside Lebanon, it is ultimately a product of the Lebanese sectarian system and works closely within this system, as examined in the literature to which this project seeks to contribute. Examples of authors whose works reduce Hezbollah to a "terrorist" or "jihadist" organization working outside of the political system are Joseph Klein and Matthew Levitt, both of whom focus on Hezbollah's religious nature as a reason for the group's violence in a problematic and essentialized understanding of Islam.<sup>111213</sup> Other works that also reduce Hezbollah to a terrorist actor or Iranian proxy, rather than a legitimate domestic party, include Thanassis Cambanis, Barbara Newman, Daniel Odin Shaw, Marius Deeb, and Hala Jaber, among others.<sup>1415161718</sup> Their works primarily focus on Hezbollah's regional and global activity, its past history of terrorist attacks, its activity against Israel, or its relationship with Iran as a proxy under the "Resistance Axis," rather than examining the group as a legitimate political actor within Lebanon.

Instead, this project will focus on literature that takes a more nuanced analysis of Hezbollah as both a militant or "resistance" group and political party operating within the Lebanese political and economic system. It will build upon numerous works charting the group's political and economic evolution more broadly, carrying forward analyses of the group's relative political power to the current moment. Leading works examined below chart Hezbollah's evolution over time and discuss its various activities from early terrorist attacks, to its resistance against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, to its changing political ideology and participation in the government. This analysis is important to understanding Hezbollah's current position, as well as the state of Lebanon's political and economic system. Additionally, there are fewer books and articles that directly address how political attitudes towards Hezbollah have evolved, and those that do, largely predate the period before the October 2019 uprising. Many works, such as those authored by Mariam Farida and Mohanad Hage Ali, focus on Hezbollah's own discourse and its relationship with supporters, rather than discourse *towards* the group and how the Lebanese population more broadly views Hezbollah, which is the primary focus of this project.<sup>1920</sup> The remainder of this literature review will examine these more nuanced works that provide an important basis for this project.

### *3.2 Hezbollah's Formation and Evolution*

When it comes to recounting and examining Hezbollah's formation and evolution, including its founding ideology of resistance, initial calls for an Islamic state, and rejection of the Lebanese political system, there

are several defining sources within the literature. Augustus Norton's widely cited book *Hezbollah* presents a short yet comprehensive history of the group that challenges conceptions of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, instead describing it as an evolving social and political movement.<sup>21</sup> Other authors have provided similarly nuanced analyses of Hezbollah that explain the group's ideological underpinnings and transition into a dominant political party, despite previously rejecting Lebanon's sectarian political system and calling for an Islamic state.<sup>22</sup> In one example, Eitan Azani tracks the evolution of Hezbollah by using social movement theory to chart Hezbollah's development across five historical stages: foundation, consolidation, expansion, institutionalization, and seizing or obtaining power.<sup>23</sup> Elaborating on its evolution through mobilization, Aurelie Daher assesses Hezbollah by analyzing its history up until 2011 and examining its internal structure, as well as the scope of its social and political action, coining the term the "Hezbollah phenomenon" to describe the occurrence of shifts in Lebanese politics since Hezbollah's entrance into the field.<sup>24</sup> This project differs in some of the assumptions of these works, like Azani's view of Hezbollah as a "pragmatic terrorist organization" with global aspirations, but it will expand on their discussions of internal dynamics, the nature of the party's domestic support, and its role in the Lebanese government to analyze these aspects following the October 17 uprising.

Authors within the literature on Hezbollah have identified significant shifts in the history of the group and Lebanon that caused changes in the party's position, such as the acceptance of the Ta'if Accord in 1989, the decision to participate in the 1992 elections, and the party's continued expansion into the government and domestic spheres. Joseph Al-Agha's work seeks to understand the transformations behind Hezbollah's expanded role in the Lebanese governing system, which is crucial to analyzing its role in the ruling political class today, as this project seeks to do.<sup>25</sup> Amanda Rizkallah, author of "The Paradox of Power-sharing: Stability and Fragility in Postwar Lebanon," goes into great depth regarding Hezbollah's capabilities and actions versus other political parties during its history. She focuses on how at the time of Lebanon's post-war transition, the power-sharing settlement following Ta'if enforced sectarian networks of mobilization by "militias-turned-parties" that have remained organizationally intact following the civil war, allowing them access to state resources while preparing them for the possibility of future violent mobilization. She claims that each group behaves differently in times of crisis based on their profile and whether they can effectively mobilize to defend their interests.<sup>26</sup> These works help explain Hezbollah's rise within the government and some of the similarities between Hezbollah and other sectarian parties (as well as differences), providing a basis for this project's argument that sees Hezbollah as not only part of the ruling political class, but as its primary defender.

A large amount of published work focuses on Hezbollah's status as an Islamic political movement and broader "resistance" movement, a term Hezbollah has traditionally relied on to rally support. Mohanad Hage Ali, the author of *Nationalism, Transnationalism, and Political Islam: Hizbullah's Institutional Identity*, says that Hezbollah has created and altered its identity around religious ideology and within its institutions in a manner similar to nationalist movements and has used this tactic to garner support from Lebanese Shias.<sup>27</sup> In his article "Hezbollah and the Framing of Resistance," Marco Nilsson describes the discourse of resistance as an all-encompassing ideology with social, political, military, and cultural dimensions and as a "continuous project of political identity formation." He describes how Hezbollah uses this rhetoric in relation to religion in order to mobilize Shia supporters while also framing the resistance as a national project to appeal to a broader Lebanese audience.<sup>28</sup> These examples are important to Hezbollah's use of religious identity and the ideology of "resistance" to interact with its predominantly Shia base and other Lebanese groups that support its activities against Israel. However, this project will go further in examining the views of Hezbollah's opponents or others critical of the group, which does not feature prominently in existing literature.

Looking further at those who highlight Hezbollah's manipulation of its identity as a resistance movement against Israel, Adham Saouli presented a nuanced view on the idea that Hezbollah's legitimacy requires an Israeli threat in two of his publishings, *Hezbollah: Socialisation and its Tragic Ironies* and "Hizbullah in the



Civilising Process: Anarchy, Self-restraint, and Violence.” In his earlier work, he puts aside Hezbollah's ideological goals as a determinant of its political behavior and instead claims that its conduct can be understood by examining the group at the intersection of war-making with Israel and state-building in Lebanon.<sup>29</sup> This contributes to tensions with Hezbollah's position inside Lebanon, particularly in the absence of an immediate Israeli threat, which is present in recent discourse, as highlighted in the *Discourse Analysis* section. In his later work, Saouli follows the group's socialization and political process from 1982 to 2017, assessing that persistent conflict with Israel has shaped and progressed Hezbollah's socialization in Lebanon.<sup>30</sup> In both of these pieces, the author explains the implications of Hezbollah's dynamic between Lebanon and Israel and how this enables the group to expand as an armed political movement and creates unintentional security paradoxes and ethical dilemmas. This ultimately serves to weaken the Lebanese state and increase political division, enabling Hezbollah to attempt to fill voids left by the state, including by taking a monopoly on violence.<sup>31</sup> Judith Harik simplifies the analysis of Hezbollah's relationship with Israel in *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism* by focusing on Hezbollah's relationships with regional actors and examining the disparity between the perception of Hezbollah as a dangerous terrorist organization and its existence as a democratically elected party. She claims the transformation from its initial existence as an armed resistance militia into a mainstream Lebanese political party explains how its support stretches beyond its main Shia base.<sup>32</sup> These works help to understand the current criticisms against Hezbollah following years of increased skepticism of its claims to be a resistance group, despite the lack of focus against Israel in recent years and the group's expanding regional activity, which contributes to tensions over its weapons – an issue that features prominently in the discourse examined for this project.

Continuing the framing of Hezbollah and its regional links, many authors have studied how the party's relationship strengthened towards foreign actors such as Iran and Syria and examined resulting tensions and controversy, which plays a role in current discourse towards the group. In her article, “The Rise of the ‘Resistance Axis’: Hezbollah and the Legacy of the Taif Agreement,” Samantha May explores Hezbollah's regional activities as part of the “Resistance Axis.” Rather than understanding Hezbollah solely as a regional actor, the author points to domestic considerations, like the Taif Agreement and Hezbollah's use of sectarianism as a tool to construct Lebanese Shia identity, and their relationship to its regional activities, while exploring some of the resulting tensions.<sup>33</sup> Alagha's “The Arab Uprisings: Hezbollah and Syria” article places the two-way relationship between Hezbollah and regional actors like Iran and Syria into the context of the Arab Spring and how the response of youth, social dynamics, and the group's involvement in Syria have impacted Hezbollah's political strategies and created increasing tension between Sunni and Shia groups, undermining the party's need to appeal to a broader constituency without aligning religious goals.<sup>34</sup> The discourse analysis of this project underscores the impact of this problem and the disillusionment with Hezbollah from segments of its broader constituency. In “Hezbollah's Ascent and Descent,” Lina Khatib claims that Hezbollah's military involvement in the Syrian civil war has brought the group to a crossroads. Domestically, Hezbollah's strength continues to grow, but its armed status and power over the political opposition could ultimately reduce Hezbollah's ability to act in Lebanon domestically.<sup>35</sup> The party's ability to act regionally despite domestic tensions is highlighted by Mariam Farida in *Religion and Hezbollah: Political Ideology and Legitimacy*. She discusses Hezbollah's use of political pragmatism and religious rhetoric to mobilize and motivate Lebanese Shias to transition the party from a resistance group within Lebanon to a group with regional goals in places like Syria.<sup>36</sup> Hezbollah's regional activity has had a polarizing impact on its support, both rallying its base against new regional threats and increasing resentment among other parts of the population, including supporters who have become disillusioned over Hezbollah's expanding regional footprint and perceived neglect of the domestic situation in Lebanon.

### 3.3 Hezbollah's Political Economy and Network of Social Services

While much of the literature on Hezbollah discusses its creation of a vast network of social services as a source of strength, this project will build on works examining some of the tensions within these services, while also looking at more recent strains in the network's ability to support for constituents as a result of the

financial crisis. Many authors focus their discussion of social services in the context of Hezbollah's relationship with its supporters and efforts to widen its base, including through the creation of a new base of Shia bourgeoisie, which was formed not only by manipulating sect loyalty and religious identity but also through this vast network of social services. In terms of how this impacts the party's relationship with its base, Aurelie Daher's *Hezbollah: Mobilization and Power* explores the party's evolution of mobilization over time in Lebanon's ever-changing social, economic, and political contexts. Daher proceeds to illustrate the political and identity-relation of the Shia community in Lebanon today that comprises a majority of Hezbollah's base and makes up the largest segment of Lebanese society.<sup>37</sup> Lara Deeb and Mona Harb's *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shite South Beirut* examine the attitudes of Hezbollah constituents and supporters through the intersection of political, religious, economic, social, cultural, and geographic considerations, focusing on an ethnographic and sociocultural study of Dahieh in southern Beirut and how the provision of social services influences the identity of Shias in the area, widely referred to as a Hezbollah "stronghold."<sup>38</sup> These works contribute to a baseline understanding of the implications of social service provision in mobilizing support, but this project will look more specifically at the implications of a possible weakening of these services in the context of Lebanon's financial crisis, as well as how service provision still drives a sense of loyalty to the party amid the instability.

Building on works examining Hezbollah's social service provision, other authors take a broader look at the party's deepening entrenchment within Lebanon's clientelist networks and neoliberal economic order, spurred in part by reconstruction after the war against Israel in 2006 that helped strengthen Hezbollah's position in the political economy and among its supporters. Melani Cammett and Sukriti Issar compare welfare programs of two sectarian parties, the Sunni Future Movement and the Shia Hezbollah, in "Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: Sectarianism and the Logics of Welfare Allocation in Lebanon." They found that while both groups used their resources to favor members of their sects and parties, the Future Movement served Lebanese outside of the Sunni class, but Hezbollah focused on mainly Lebanese Shia communities. They determined that although both exist and operate within the same contexts institutionally and economically, how they maneuver in these contexts differs, giving them distinct political mobilization strategies that explain the difference in patterns of service delivery between both groups.<sup>39</sup> Cammett goes into further detail on this topic in *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon*. She explains how religious groups and non-state actors like Hezbollah provide welfare benefits in gaps where the state cannot service and do so to achieve a variety of political and social goals. The author points out that the concerning price of sectarian actors stepping into the state's role deepens social divisions, maintaining opposing views of the polity and introducing new forms of social inequality.<sup>40</sup> Cammett's nuanced understanding of Hezbollah's position as one comparable to other sectarian parties provides a key basis of this project's analysis of the party as part of the ruling political class, challenging other works mentioned previously that exceptionalize Hezbollah, instead of understanding the party and its clientelist networks as a product of Lebanon's political economy and governing system.

As a political economist, Joseph Daher turned his focus to Lebanon and Hezbollah's role in the country's neoliberal economic system and sectarianism, providing a foundational understanding for this project's analysis of Hezbollah's position within this system. In *Hezbollah: The Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God*, the author frames his analysis of Lebanon's political economy and Hezbollah's role around its relationship within social and class dynamics, the Lebanese bourgeoisie, its popular Shia base of mobilization, the political sphere, and attitudes towards the Lebanese state.<sup>41</sup> In a more recent article entitled "Hezbollah, Neoliberalism and Political Economy" that follows the outbreak of the October 17 uprising, Daher stresses Hezbollah's reaction to popular mobilization challenging the Lebanese political system to better understand their role in the neoliberal economic system.<sup>42</sup> In his works, Daher assesses that understandings of Hezbollah should not be limited to its so-called "Islamic way of life," but instead should be understood in its political, economic, and social contexts, as well as both at the national and regional level. He describes how the party uses rhetoric, inequality, and sectarianism in the Lebanese system to solidify the party's support among impoverished Shias through social welfare institutions. He

claims that Hezbollah is intertwined within the capitalist system and different factions of the Lebanese bourgeoisie, perpetuating the neoliberal economic system and corruption by acting no different than other political parties in Lebanon.<sup>43</sup> Adding to this analysis of Hezbollah's political economy, Lara Deeb and Mona Harb's *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shite South Beirut* look specifically at the party's role in the "leisure sector" and in developing Dahieh, providing a unique perspective focused on the social, political, and urban implications.<sup>44</sup> These understandings counter Hezbollah's claims that it is somehow independent of the Lebanese neoliberal economic system, which plays out in interesting ways within the discourse examined for this project.

### *3.4 Lebanon's Broader Consociational Power-sharing System and Neoliberal Economy*

While Hezbollah is certainly the primary focus of this project, discourse towards the group reveals broader tensions with Lebanon's political and economic systems that will be analyzed in subsequent sections and requires a broader understanding of these systems. Consociational power-sharing, sectarianism, and political gridlock have long defined Lebanon's political system dating back to political arrangements under the Ottoman Empire and French Mandate following WWI. Over the past ten years, Bassel F. Salloukh has focused much of his research and publications on sectarianism and consociational power-sharing in Lebanon, including *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* and "Transforming Power Sharing: From Corporate to Hybrid Consociation in Postwar Lebanon." The author addresses tensions in corporate consociational arrangements throughout Lebanon's history, beginning with the formalization of the consociational system under the 1943 National Pact and concluding that after the civil war, the system served to harden sectarian identities while discriminating against cross-sectarian and anti-sectarian groups.<sup>45</sup> He notes that the Lebanese political elite could escape the consequences of the Arab Spring unscathed due to the sectarian system they maintain because groups that are opposed and attempt to change the system are frequently sabotaged or absorbed by it.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, he identifies the 2015 popular demonstrations in Lebanon and the emergence of non-sectarian political movements as evidence of the failure of the "entire political economy underpinning the postwar order."<sup>47</sup> He defines Lebanon's power-sharing system as a corporate consociation and claims it is in "institutional crisis," calling for institutional reforms to move towards a hybrid consociation model that recognizes Lebanon's domestic and regional realities.<sup>48</sup> Salloukh's prescient analysis is helpful to understanding the outbreak of the October 17 uprising, the deepening financial crisis, and political gridlock inherent in the consociational system that has prevented any viable solutions to Lebanon's turmoil, which will be examined in more detail in the *Discourse Analysis* section.

Drawing further on critical analyses of Lebanon's political system, Tamirace Fakhoury examines consociational power-sharing inside Lebanon in the postwar era and post-2011 period in "Power-sharing after the Arab Spring? Insights from Lebanon's Political Transition." The author discusses three recurring political dilemmas since the civil war ended: the power-sharing system's "proneness to deadlock," externally-induced crises like the Syrian civil war, and elites' weak response to demands from below after the Arab Spring. Fakhoury states that these three dilemmas fuel the politics of sectarianism and point to the limits of sectarian power-sharing's functionality.<sup>49</sup> Brenda Seaver used Lebanon as a case study in "The Regional Sources of Power-Sharing Failure" to show how consociational power-sharing inside Lebanon represents the only "durable" consociational democracy among plural societies despite its fragility. The author outlines the determinants of breakdowns in the consociational power-sharing system building on Arend Lijphart's model of four key requirements: elite power-sharing and cooperation, a mutual veto, proportionality, and communal autonomy. Her primary argument is that failure to uphold these requirements is primarily driven by regional dynamics, looking for example at how the Palestinian-Israeli conflict influenced the outbreak of the 1975 civil war.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to Seaver and Fakhoury, this project will look more specifically at domestic dynamics driving tensions within the consociational system and the failings of the system itself in sustaining sectarianism, corruption, inequality, and instability within Lebanon.

In a more recent analysis that has greatly informed the theoretical framework of this project, Salloukh and Ibrahim Halawi have described the counter-revolutionary nature of consociational power-sharing in Lebanon and the Middle East. Salloukh edited and contributed to the recent volume “Consociational Power-Sharing in the Arab World: A Critical Stocktaking” with articles examining consociational power-sharing in the region. His introduction outlines the basics of the power-sharing model, noting the requirements needed for a consociational democracy to function as theorized by Lijphart. He discusses the October 17 uprising in Lebanon and the Beirut port explosion to critique the exclusionary features of consociational power-sharing.<sup>51</sup> Halawi’s article in the volume, “Consociational Power-Sharing in the Arab World as Counter-Revolution,” describes how consociational power-sharing models in the Middle East – specifically Lebanon and Iraq – have acted as a counter-revolution to uphold exclusionary state-building arrangements. He makes this argument in the context of uprisings inside both countries that reflect this dynamic and the broader argument of consociational power-sharing models’ inherent counter-revolutionary nature, calling into question the viability of cross- or anti-sectarian movements like those seen in the 2019 uprisings in both Lebanon and Iraq that have faced significant challenges.<sup>52</sup>

Another inherent issue in Lebanon is the country's political-economic structure and how political actors have used the economic and political system to deepen clientelist networks and neoliberal economic policies following the Lebanese civil war. Salloukh's "Taif and the Lebanese State: The Political Economy of a Very Sectarian Public Sector" merges Lebanon's political, economic, and consociational power-sharing issues. He states that the 1989 Ta'if Agreement altered the consociational power-sharing arrangement in Lebanon by widening the theater for clientelism, corruption, and interference in the public sector through rentier practices along clientelist and sectarian lines that adversely affected Lebanon's political economy.<sup>53</sup> Cammett and Ishac Diwan specifically examine Lebanon in *A Political Economy of the Middle East* and the interaction of economic development processes, state systems, policies, and social actors in the Middle East. They focused on the rise in crony capitalism, which has contributed to the current uprising's grievances against the political elites' involvement in Lebanon's financial crisis.<sup>54</sup> Ala'a Shehabi takes on a contemporary analysis of Lebanon's political economy in “Inequality, Rentierism and the Roots of Lebanon's October 2019 Uprising.” Shehabi's article provides a formal framework that explains how the protests and financial crisis have been perpetuated by inequality and sectarianism within the economic foundations of rentierism, which produced deep inequality through coercive power and exploitation. The author further details how rentierism precipitated the monopolization of markets, especially in terms of elite capture of Lebanese banks owned by the political class, their holding of more government bonds, and the provision of loans through political favoritism. Interestingly, the author argues that the financial crisis did not occur because of inequalities but because of the inability to imagine alternatives to the corrupt consociational system - in politics, governance, and economics.<sup>55</sup> This project will build on these critical analyses of Lebanon's political economy to look at the spillover of tensions into public discourse that reflect discontent with the system, alongside Hezbollah's position within it.

## **4.0 Methodology**

To understand how discourse has changed in Lebanon towards Hezbollah since the October 17 uprising, this paper attempts to study and analyze trends in popular public discourse among the Lebanese population. For this purpose, discourse is defined as the various ways in which people talk about a certain topic, whether in the media, on social media, in protests, or any other public setting. As part of the research design, the authors identified over thirty significant domestic developments related to the October 17 protests, the financial crisis, COVID-19, efforts to form governments, the Beirut port explosion, and the assassination of activist Louqman Slim which provided points of research to analyze evolving discourse in light of these developments. The timeline of events was utilized to pinpoint conversations occurring on mainstream media, alternative media, and social media, as well as within protests, speeches, and public statements.

The analysis in this paper engaged with information across a broad span of Lebanese-based sources to collect various examples of discourse in an attempt to accurately represent multiple segments of the Lebanese population. These include local mainstream media stations, newspapers, websites, and online news platforms. The methods used in this research ensured the utilization of numerous sources to reflect the varying party loyalties and affiliations that mainstream media has in Lebanon in order to represent all points of view and try to balance against inherent bias. Content systematically collected for discourse analysis included Lebanese media outlets for articles, opinion pieces, interviews, talk shows, and other relevant content, discussing Hezbollah within the past year, as well as videos and information on Hezbollah-related chants from various protests.

In order to access a broader range of Lebanese people, the authors utilized social media websites like Twitter, Instagram, blogs, podcasts, and news clips or interviews on YouTube. Specifically, qualitative social media research was also conducted using accounts associated with activists, journalists, Hezbollah supporters, and opponents on content discussing the group, as well as hashtags and campaigns that emerged during the uprising and in recent months both against and in support of Hezbollah. This paper has also drawn on official statements directly from party-affiliated websites and television platforms to have a more in-depth understanding of discourse and reactions to key events. Although there were efforts made to pull examples of discourse from a broad range of Lebanese-based resources and generally avoid foreign media sites, it is impossible to completely avoid foreign influence due to the presence of foreign funding across many of Lebanon's media platforms.

To supplement the primary and secondary research contributing to this paper, interviews were conducted with experts, activists, and journalists to discuss their views on various aspects of our project. Sets of questions were designed prior to conducting these interviews, tailored to the subjects, their positions, and their expertise. These interviews provided insight into important trends and helped further contextualize findings to provide analysis about ongoing developments in the discourse towards Hezbollah since the October 17 uprising. In order to ensure the safety of the participating interviewees and comply with ethical standards, some interviews were conducted informally or off the record to ensure anonymity and will not be cited by name within the paper.

## **5.0 Discourse Analysis**

### *5.1 Overview*

Discourse towards Hezbollah during Lebanon's unprecedented instability highlights important trends taking place within Lebanese society related to issues of identity, sectarianism, socioeconomic instability, political discontent, and most importantly for this study, Hezbollah's position within these debates. The following section will present examples from various forms of Lebanese media and statements from individuals that provide insight into how various groups view Hezbollah since the outbreak of the October 17 uprising, broken down into three main sections. The first, *Internal Criticism*, looks at supporters and allies that have expressed criticism towards Hezbollah, followed by *Sharpening Opposition*, which focuses on opponents that have deepened criticism of the group, and finally, *Holding the Line*, which examines supporters and allies that remain supportive of the group and have defended their actions. Among these three groupings, the most compelling trend is that of internal criticism, which poses the most significant threat to Hezbollah and has the power to fuel a decline in its political support and power.

For all three groups, there have been a number of defining moments from the past year and a half that have produced crucial, and often polarizing, responses to Hezbollah. Chief among these was the outbreak of the October 17 uprising itself and Hezbollah's decision to oppose the protests. Hezbollah's position, and specifically Nasrallah's second speech on October 25, served as a critical moment in either opening the door for new criticism against the group among its supporters or deepening criticism among its opponents. On the other hand, Hezbollah's ardent supporters followed the group's signals and turned on the protests, repeating claims of foreign interference and shielding Hezbollah and Nasrallah from criticism.

The financial crisis more broadly and the socioeconomic deterioration faced by Lebanese across sect, region, and class is another defining issue that, as seen in examples in the discourse, has played an important role in cross-sectarian mobilization across the country and discontent against the ruling political class, including Hezbollah. While there are conflicting accounts over Hezbollah's financial situation, it is impossible to escape the effects of Lebanon's rapid economic deterioration and its social fallout, even if an individual or family receives direct financial support from the group. This is reflected in the discourse among supporters or constituents in Hezbollah-dominated areas that have expressed criticism of the party given their deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances and living conditions. The financial crisis also became a flashpoint for political opponents and critics who reject Hezbollah's efforts to blame the financial crisis solely on the banks or the economic policies of the 1990s, instead pointing to Hezbollah's parallel economy and illicit activities. Hezbollah supporters have also mobilized around the financial crisis to defend the group's activities and place the blame on the banks and neoliberal economic policies, in line with Nasrallah and other officials' rhetoric.

### *5.2 Internal Criticism*

In terms of internal criticism, this section will focus on Hezbollah supporters, allies, and public figures linked to the group who have expressed varying degrees of criticism towards Hezbollah since the October 17 uprising. The initial protests saw widespread mobilization across the country that included areas considered to be strongholds of Hezbollah across southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. On the first night of demonstrations, protesters attacked the offices of both Amal and Hezbollah officials in Nabatieh in the south,<sup>56</sup> including the office of Hezbollah MP Mohammed Raad where protesters knocked down the sign for his office and chanted "the people want the fall of the regime," indicating their view of Raad as part of the ruling class.<sup>57</sup> Although it is unclear if these individuals were specifically Hezbollah supporters, the outbreak of demonstrations against the party in Nabatieh, a city considered to be a stronghold of Hezbollah and Amal, was notable. During the next day of protests, as journalists passed the microphone to demonstrators across the country, a man from Baalbek expressed support for the resistance but proceeded

to criticize Nasrallah and Berri over Baalbek's situation to a cheering crowd around him.<sup>58</sup> In an interview with AlJadeed on October 25, after Nasrallah's second speech in which he denounced the protests, self-proclaimed supporters of Hezbollah and the resistance explained their decision to continue demonstrating, calling Baalbek "disadvantaged" and pleading with Nasrallah himself to demand support.<sup>59</sup> In a protest the next day by women in Baalbek, protesters expressed similar sentiments, first noting their support for the resistance but stating they came to protest peacefully to demand to live in dignity, despite Nasrallah's speech the day before in which he called on supporters to leave the streets.<sup>60</sup> In another example, two young men from Baalbek and the south protesting in Beirut told an MTV reporter that they are against the entire state, including Hezbollah and Amal after the reporter specifically asked them if the two parties were included, reiterating "all of them."<sup>61</sup> These are several examples of the many in the early days of the protests in which self-proclaimed supporters of the resistance and constituents of Hezbollah voiced their broader discontent with the situation and continued to do so despite the party's position.

Within the media, Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar, which typically takes a favorable stance towards Hezbollah, showed conflicting positions in its coverage of the protests in the initial days, especially after Nasrallah's first two speeches. For context, the Arabic language daily has leftist and anti-American leanings and a focus on social justice that largely aligns with some of the demands from the uprising. This was captured in an article by editor-in-chief Ibrahim Al-Amine describing the outbreak of the protests as "a real opportunity for change."<sup>62</sup> In a recap of Nasrallah's speech published on October 20 that acknowledged protests taking place even within the "spheres of influence of 'the Shia duo,'" columnist Pierre Abi Saab suggested Hezbollah was "paying the price for its mandatory partnerships in this corrupt structure," saying the party "faces a state of resentment in the hearts of its base."<sup>63</sup> Saab discussed how Nasrallah's stance "shocked" revolutionaries but should have been expected. In a sharper critique following Nasrallah's second speech, Faraj Al-Awar described Nasrallah as taking the "surprising" position of "official spokesman for the Lebanese regime" and called the leader's defense of the Lebanese system a "strange scene that causes great regret."<sup>64</sup>

These articles highlight conflicting sentiments shared by a portion of Hezbollah's base that saw the outbreak of the uprising as a defining moment with the real possibility of change. In an interview conducted for this project, Lebanese analyst Bachar el-Halabi described this segment as leftists and anti-imperialists who oppose the sectarian system and viewed the uprising as a "moment of truth" because people gathered in the streets for purely socioeconomic demands that they had been calling for decades.<sup>65</sup> They had hoped Hezbollah, who they view as the only party capable of challenging the sectarian system, would do something to address these demands, but instead, the party moved against the uprising early on, alienating much of this segment of its base, as Halabi noted. In a sign of these pressures playing out at Al-Akhbar, several journalists ultimately resigned from the paper in early November, citing its coverage of the October 17 uprising, which increasingly turned skeptical following Nasrallah's speeches.<sup>66</sup>

Building on examples of the discourse surrounding the uprising and Hezbollah's stance, several public figures that have expressed support for Hezbollah or the resistance in the past noted their opposition to the party's position on the uprising. Media personality Hicham Haddad, who hosts a comedic talk show on LBC, went on Sawt Beirut International's "An Embarrassing Question," hosted by Tony Khalife, a year after the uprising began and was asked to choose who he prefers between the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rai and Hezbollah leader Nasrallah. He made it clear that he has always supported the resistance as someone from the southern town Marjayoun and expressed support for Nasrallah previously on social media. However, he said his position changed after the October 17 uprising because he was surprised by an interview with a senior Hezbollah official noting the party's preference to back the political class rather than establish a relationship with the youth of the uprising. Haddad said the problem with Hezbollah is that its issues have become bigger than Lebanon with its ties to Iraq, Yemen, and Iran. He concluded that when it comes to the resistance against Israel, he will always align with Nasrallah, but he chose the Patriarch based on his positions on the uprising and non-alignment.<sup>67</sup>

In December 2020, Sheikh Yasser Aoude went on the same program and was faced with the choice between Nasrallah and Imam Musa Sadr.<sup>68</sup> Sheikh Aoude is not a member of Hezbollah but previously studied under prominent Shia cleric Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah who was closely connected to the founders of the group. He also came out in support of the uprising from its outset and gave multiple sermons and speeches critical of the ruling political class, including Nasrallah and Amal leader Nabih Berri.<sup>69</sup> When faced with the choice between Nasrallah and Sadr, Shiekh Aoude said he could not choose between them, noting the importance of both figures, particularly to the resistance. However, when it comes to Nasrallah, he said they differ on the October 17 uprising specifically and that if Sadr was here today, he would tell the ruling political class to leave. The host Khalife pointed out that some people blame Nasrallah for protecting the political class.

Sharing the sentiments of Aoude, Haddad, and others who have taken issue with Hezbollah's backing of the ruling political class, an employee of the Al-Qard Al-Hassan Association, a Hezbollah-affiliated financial institution, criticized the group's alliance with Amal and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), accusing the party of keeping silent about their corruption to protect its weapons.<sup>70</sup> In an interview with Al-Modon, the anonymous employee noted Hezbollah's involvement in the Lebanese government since 2005 and stated that since then, the party has not presented any economic plan to avert the financial collapse. Instead, the party was exploited by its allies and "became their partner in corruption." While Hezbollah has tried to shield itself from allegations of corruption or involvement in the policies that led to the economic collapse today, the group has had a much harder time justifying its support for and efforts to shield parties like FPM and Amal and their leaders.

On a related issue, Hezbollah received criticism and skepticism for allegedly allowing, or at least not blocking, the release of Amer Fakhoury on March 16, 2020. Fakhoury, known as "the butcher of Khiam" for his role as commander of the notorious Khiam Prison in the 1980s and 1990s as a member of the Israel-backed South Lebanon Army, was detained in September 2019 upon his arrival to Lebanon from the United States. Under pressure from the Trump administration, Fakhoury, an American citizen, was released in March in a decision later condemned by Hezbollah and leader Nasrallah. However, the group faced backlash and suspicion from its supporters across social media platforms over its failure to prevent or respond to Fakhoury's release, as noted in an Al-Akhbar article discussing Nasrallah's speech about the issue on March 20.<sup>71</sup> Nasrallah claimed the group had no knowledge of the deal that led to Fakhoury's release, despite media reports suggesting Hezbollah had allowed it to happen at the behest of allies like FPM. In that speech, Nasrallah responded to "allies and friends" who accused Hezbollah of enabling the release and rejected calls for a response from supporters, stating "we do not act on mood or emotion." Nasrallah's response reflected concern over the criticism the party was receiving, most notably from its own supporters and allies, in response to Fakhoury's release.

In an Al-Modon article interviewing supporters and constituents of Hezbollah, discourse towards the group reflected growing economic anxiety and related discontent with the party's failure to prevent the crisis. An unnamed gas station worker who took out a loan from Al-Qard Al-Hassan said he is now repaying at the devalued black market exchange rate. The worker warned "prices are rising, and the party is not helping with a solution to the crisis."<sup>72</sup> In an article from Al Mashareq, a cook from the western Bekaa Valley said he was one of Hezbollah's staunchest supporters, but his sentiments have changed since the start of the economic collapse. He blamed the group for Lebanon's economic issues, stating "we are paying the price" for its policies and involvement in regional conflicts.<sup>73</sup> A resident in Nabatieh shared similar sentiments about the economic and financial crisis and suggested "the party has deceived us." In the same article, journalist Ali Badreddine from the Wai (Awareness) Charity Association in Nabatieh noted that rising poverty among the Shia population is the main issue driving protests in the south to express anger against officials and Hezbollah, claiming the party has not fulfilled its promises to improve people's living conditions or taken steps to prevent the economic collapse.



As the economic situation worsened, related protests taking place across the country, including areas linked to Hezbollah, featured further cries of economic desperation. With the Lebanese lira declining in value to around 5,000 against the dollar, demonstrations broke out on June 11, 2020 in Beirut and across the country. In the middle of an episode of the popular MTV talk show *Sar El Wa2t*, the program cut several times to MTV reporters speaking with protesters in Beirut who included self-proclaimed supporters of Hezbollah and Amal. The protests featured chants of cross-sectarian solidarity such as “Shia, Sunni, f\*\*\* sectarianism” and “Islam, Christianity, f\*\*\* sectarianism.”<sup>74</sup> The protesters stated they went out to the streets not because of any sectarian leader, but because they are hungry. A group of young men who claimed they were from Dahieh stated “we are with the weapons of the resistance” and “our blood is yellow, but we are hungry.”<sup>75</sup> While the protesters did not directly criticize Hezbollah, they returned to the streets despite the party’s position against the uprising in solidarity with other protesters to express their economic discontent.

Building on the rising internal pressure within Lebanon, pro-Hezbollah journalist Kassem Kassir gave what proved to be a controversial interview with the Amal-owned National Broadcasting Network (NBN) on January 6, 2021 in which he suggested Hezbollah should turn its attention inward to focus on Lebanon and become a Lebanese party, stating the group can no longer continue its current relationship with Iran.<sup>76</sup> Although he still noted the positive impacts of this relationship, particularly in terms of religion, he called for a restructuring with an implied criticism of Hezbollah’s involvement in other countries in the region. He also took up the issue of the resistance and Hezbollah’s weapons, calling for their incorporation into Lebanon’s national defense strategy. The interview received widespread criticism from Hezbollah’s base who called Kassir a traitor and accused him of receiving money from abroad, among other efforts to discredit him.<sup>77</sup> NBN even removed the video of the interview from its platforms. Kassir himself eventually apologized and reiterated his continued commitment to the resistance following the attacks on social media.<sup>78</sup> The response was telling in how Hezbollah and its loyal base view dissent from someone like Kassir, who has long been aligned with the group and the resistance. In an interview conducted for this project, Dr. Joseph Daher described the response as a way to show Hezbollah does not accept such criticism, even internally. The party continues to use various techniques to try and silence criticism.

Kassir’s comments followed more than a year of mounting criticism against Hezbollah since the outbreak of the October 17 uprising and amid the rapid deterioration in Lebanon’s socioeconomic situation. From the party’s standpoint, the most concerning trend in discourse has proved to be the expanding criticism and debate from within its base in the examples mentioned above, exemplified in Kassir’s comments and the swift and harsh response against his nuanced take on how the party should adapt in the face of Lebanon’s turmoil. His interview and the criticism seen among supporters and constituents unhappy with their socioeconomic circumstances build on years of increasing skepticism of Hezbollah’s activities internally with the party’s expanding focus outside of Lebanon and its failure to meaningfully challenge the corrupt political and economic system, despite pledges to do so. Concurrently, Hezbollah has faced a sharp escalation in skepticism and criticism from its various opponents since the October 17 uprising, adding further pressure against the party.

### *5.3 Sharpening Opposition*

Turning to Hezbollah’s opposition, the October 17 uprising and its aftermath presented both an opportunity and challenge to addressing what they perceive as Hezbollah’s destructive or largely negative role in Lebanon. This section will examine political opponents, activists, and others already critical of Hezbollah and how they have used the series of crises in Lebanon, and Hezbollah’s actions, to deepen criticism of the group. While some – namely the party’s political opponents – have tried to blame Hezbollah for many of the crises befalling the country for political reasons, others have done so in opposition to Hezbollah’s role as protector of the ruling political class and leader of the counter-revolution. The discourse includes some criticisms that have followed Hezbollah for years, such as the status of its weapons and its ties to

Iran, but opponents and activists have become more emboldened in their criticism of the group alongside the more hostile rhetoric towards the political class since the outbreak of the uprising. Key events that affected the discourse include the uprising itself, Hezbollah's opposition to the protests, the party's involvement in forming the new government, the deterioration of the economic situation, the outbreak of COVID-19, the August 4 Beirut port explosion, and, finally, the assassination of Louqman Slim.

With the outset of the October 17 uprising, activists and protesters' positions varied on Hezbollah, but some described a calculated move to criticize all parties equally under the "all of them means all of them"<sup>79</sup> chant to represent the cross-sectarian nature of the mobilization. Activists involved in the uprising lauded the cross-sectarian nature of the uprising and the involvement of cities and regions across the country, including Hezbollah strongholds in the south and the Bekaa. In a blog post on October 18, activist and blogger Gino Raidy described the protests as "a seismic shift, where the wall of fear has finally crumbled for many of our Shia brothers and sisters."<sup>80</sup>

Nasrallah's first speech on October 19 cemented himself as part of the ruling political class in the eyes of many of the protesters, who began chanting "all of them means all of them, and Nasrallah is one of them"<sup>81</sup> immediately after his speech.<sup>82</sup> Protesters began to include Nasrallah's name alongside the likes of Gebran Bassil, Michel Aoun, Nabih Berri, and Saad Hariri. Famous Lebanese singer Elissa was present at some of the early protests and specifically shouted "Nasrallah is one of them" while protesters were chanting against another politician, Samir Geagea of the Lebanese forces, who she has supported in the past.<sup>83</sup> Another popular chant by protesters included "come on leave Nasrallah."<sup>84</sup> The direct inclusion of Nasrallah in these chants in the streets marked a turning point in the discourse towards the leader and Hezbollah, as well as the broader ruling political class, in which protesters felt emboldened to directly call out and insult politicians. For Hezbollah's supporters, Nasrallah's status as a religious leader made these chants particularly problematic, but for others, the chants solidified their view of Nasrallah among the ruling elites.

In a breakdown of Nasrallah's October 19 speech, independent media platform Megaphone News labeled Nasrallah "the symbol of the counter-revolution," highlighting his statement that the current government will not fall and other statements supportive of the ruling political class.<sup>85</sup> Megaphone has become increasingly popular since the start of the uprising for its outspoken criticism of the ruling political class, its reliance on social media, and its lack of political affiliation, unlike the rest of the Lebanese media scene. Tensions clearly increased by the time of Nasrallah's second speech on October 25 during which clashes broke out between Hezbollah supporters and protesters in Riad al-Solh square in Beirut, before a number of the supporters withdrew heeding Nasrallah's call during his speech.<sup>86</sup> Megaphone's coverage highlighted Nasrallah's "mocking" of the idea of bringing down the regime and his warning that factions are leading and funding the protest movement, even suggesting the CIA and Israel's possible interference. In a separate video, Megaphone juxtaposed Nasrallah's comments about the civil war and the potential for violence with anti-sectarian and nationalistic chants and songs from the protests thus far.<sup>87</sup>

Nasrallah's questioning of the protest movement's leaders and financing spurred a popular social media campaign and chants in the street of people claiming to be the leader or the financier of the revolution.<sup>88</sup> Individuals across social media posted videos stating, "I am the financier of the revolution"<sup>89</sup> in a campaign that included the participation of celebrities and public figures in a direct response to and rebuke of Nasrallah's speech.<sup>90</sup> Amid the campaign, Future TV presenter and political satirist Nadim Koteich likened Nasrallah to Muammar Gaddafi with his questioning of the protesters, stitching together parts of Nasrallah's speech and Gaddafi's question of "who are you?" to the protesters of the 2011 Libyan revolution.<sup>91</sup>

Hezbollah's political opponents exploited the moment of the uprising to challenge the party's position, particularly the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb parties who also tried to rebrand themselves as part of the revolution. In several interviews following the outbreak of the uprising, Kataeb leader Samy Gemayel directed criticism at Hezbollah, noting people were in the streets responding to Nasrallah's first speech.<sup>92</sup>

He accused Nasrallah of holding on to the “sulta” (authority, used to refer to the ruling political class) because he is the one who created it. In an interview with Saudi-run Al-Arabiya, Gemayel said “Hezbollah holds the greatest responsibility” for the situation in Lebanon due to its use of the Lebanese state for its interests.<sup>93</sup> Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea called Nasrallah’s first speech contradictory and made it clear that his party’s ministers resigned from the government despite Nasrallah’s warning to politicians to remain in their positions.<sup>94</sup>

Discourse towards Hezbollah and its supporters became increasingly negative in the aftermath of attacks on protesters by Hezbollah and Amal supporters. In a tweet after clashes in Beirut, Gemayel, without naming Hezbollah, called the party the official sponsor of the government and said it resorted to the tactics it excels at, such as “breaking, intimidation and thuggery.”<sup>95</sup> Prominent journalist and TV presenter Dima Sadek had her phone stolen, allegedly by a member of Hezbollah, while taking part in protests in Beirut.<sup>96</sup> Sadek, who is originally from southern Lebanon, has taken a critical stance towards the party and previously tweeted the phrase “Nasrallah is one of them” amid the uprising. The incident escalated after an exchange in which Sadek tweeted a video asking, “Isn’t stealing forbidden?”<sup>97</sup> and an imam in southern Lebanon responded in a speech justifying the theft of Sadek’s phone, calling her a “traitor” and an Israeli agent, suggesting her crimes are punishable by death, which Sadek and other public figures called incitement to murder.<sup>98</sup> Amid the exchange, Sadek went on Al Jadeed in a tell-all style interview in which she claimed she did not have a problem with Hezbollah before October 17, except for its intervention in Syria and the May 7, 2008 incident. She appealed to Hezbollah’s electronic army and supporters to stop attacking journalists and protesters, claiming people used to respect Hezbollah’s discipline and morals but now they behave like this.<sup>99</sup> The incident added to characterizations of Hezbollah in the discourse as being violent religious fanatics.

In an interview for this project, Lebanese journalist and founder of the Beirut Report Habib Battah discussed a broader trend of a new “vulgarity in [Lebanon’s] politics and media” since the October 17 uprising, pointing to the use of misogynistic and insulting chants. In regard to the discourse towards Hezbollah, he noted the influence of anti-Shia sentiment, especially by political opponents of other sects. He called a lot of the criticism of the party and its supporters “dehumanizing,” “hateful,” and “Islamophobic,” with the use of labels like rats, dogs, terrorists, and the mafia.<sup>100</sup> Dr. Denijal Jegić, a Beirut-based researcher and writer, shared similar sentiments, noting a more “radicalized” discourse towards Hezbollah among its opponents, often influenced by sectarianism and anti-Shia sentiment.<sup>101</sup> He said opponents often use the term Hezbollah as a synonym for Shia, which can lead to racialization and dehumanization in a replication of Western orientalism and continuation of the exclusion of Shias throughout Lebanon’s history.

In a related example, former minister Charbel Nahas of the Citizens in a State<sup>102</sup> (MMFD) party was forced to issue an apology in November 2019 after a speech in which he criticized Hezbollah supporters by suggesting they remind people they are Shia with their clothing.<sup>103</sup> He also called Hezbollah’s ministers in the government “sheep” and talked about how some party members come from an environment in the south where families welcomed the Israeli occupation. These comments drew backlash from supporters of the party and others who called the statements offensive, particularly those about the clothing of Shias. Nahas apologized for his choice of words and praised those that fought against Israel in the south.<sup>104</sup>

The formation of a new government following Prime Minister Hariri’s resignation on October 29 placed a spotlight on Hezbollah’s role and led to greater blame against the group for the government’s failures. Lebanese media, international media, and political opponents widely referred to Hassan Diab’s cabinet, formed on January 21, 2020, as “the government of Hezbollah.”<sup>105</sup> In an interview with OTV after his parliamentary confirmation, Diab refuted claims that he was linked to either Hezbollah or Amal.<sup>106</sup> Michel Kanbour, who runs the news site the Lebanon Debate, described the government as a “techno-political” one created in the vision of Hezbollah to place ministers with links to the various sectarian parties, despite claims that they are technocrats.<sup>107</sup> Following the resignation of Diab in August after the Beirut port

explosion, political opponents blamed the “Shia duo” (Hezbollah and Amal) for blocking attempts to form a government, including an initiative by French President Emmanuel Macron. MTV presenter Riad Tawk said the “Shia duo” is the one that decides if a government will or will not be formed.<sup>108</sup> Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Joumblatt reiterated this sentiment in an interview in October 2020, stating Hezbollah is the ruler of the country and that Hariri handed the Lebanese state over to the “Shia duo” and FPM.<sup>109</sup>

The outbreak of COVID-19 brought a new layer of scrutiny to Hezbollah for its ties to Iran and efforts early on to blame the party for the virus’ spread into the country. Lebanon confirmed its first COVID-19 case on February 21, 2020 linked to a woman who had returned from Iran.<sup>110</sup> Following the confirmation, public figures, including famous singer Elissa, and individuals on social media placed the blame on Hezbollah, claiming the group prevented the government from suspending flights from Iran.<sup>111</sup> As the pandemic escalated in the second half of the year, Minister of Health Hamad Hassan, a member of Hezbollah, received the brunt of the government’s criticism for the handling of the crisis. Videos and pictures of him dancing at a celebration in Baalbek in July and cutting a cake at a birthday party for Nasrallah in November were widely shared on social media and have become a “meme” of sorts for those critiquing the government’s handling of the pandemic.<sup>112113114</sup> Other officials have received similar criticism for their activities amid the pandemic, but the initial backlash against Hezbollah and accusations of its responsibility for the virus’ spread contributed to the environment of blame against the party.

The deepening of the financial crisis also affected political and public discourse towards Hezbollah in the eyes of the group’s opponents. Nasrallah gave a speech on March 28 focused on COVID-19 that included criticism of the Association of Banks and demands to allow small depositors to withdraw their money.<sup>115</sup> Politicians like deputy head of Kataeb Salim al-Sayegh accused Hezbollah of trying to control the banking system and blamed the economic crisis on the party, in part, alongside the banks and the ruling system.<sup>116</sup> Future Movement member of parliament Mohammed al-Hajjar noted everyone is responsible in some way for the crisis today, but that Hezbollah, “its wars,” and “its disruption of constitutional institutions” have had a significant cost, including through the deterioration of relations with Gulf countries. Other political opponents also chimed in on the speech, seeking to lay some of the blame on Hezbollah for the economic situation today and to paint the party as trying to withdraw Lebanon from the global economy.

In the media, the discourse surrounding Hezbollah and the economic situation centered on similar efforts to hold Hezbollah responsible, at least in part, for the collapse or to portray the group as shielded from the fallout due to its funding from Iran, “parallel economy,” and involvement in illicit activity. Amid the lira’s continued decline in value and rising prices for Lebanese citizens, Sar El Wa2t host Marcel Ghanem called on Prime Minister Hassan Diab to resign in an episode in July 2020, directly blaming Hezbollah, Amal, and the Free Patriotic Movement for backing the government despite people being “sad, hungry, and in need.”<sup>117</sup> Notably, an Al-Akhbar article described his comments as “incitement against Hezbollah.”<sup>118</sup> LBC and MTV both released videos billed as exposés on Hezbollah’s “parallel” economy with a breakdown of the group’s use of its own financial institutions like the Al-Qard Al-Hassan Association, the Jihad Al Bina development foundation financed by Iran, and various agricultural projects for Hezbollah constituencies. In LBC’s video, the media company asked, “Why did the party not fight against the system of corruption in Lebanon? Is it because it benefitted from it to protect its interests and build a parallel economy?”<sup>119</sup> MTV accused Hezbollah of constructing its own banking sector similar to the Lebanese banking sector and using its influence to control the borders, ports, and airports of the country.<sup>120</sup> LBC and MTV are both generally associated with the March 14 alliance and typically critical of Hezbollah.

Hezbollah’s weapons and status as the only group to officially keep its arms after the civil war is an issue that has long featured in political discourse towards the party, but various opponents have capitalized on the heightened scrutiny towards Hezbollah to push the issue amid Lebanon’s instability. On May 30 and June 6, 2020, opponents organized demonstrations calling for the disarmament of Hezbollah in Beirut.<sup>121</sup> The second demonstration led to clashes between demonstrators and supporters of Hezbollah and Amal.

Kataeb member of parliament Nadim Gemayel supported the demonstrations, stating “there is no reform or revolution before solving the root of the problem, the domination of weapons” after blaming Hezbollah for the political and economic situation.<sup>122</sup> In a clip on the talk show *Sar El Wa2t*, satirist Nadim Koteich addressed questions about his criticism of Hezbollah and stated, “whoever wants to eat rockets, eat on their own; whoever wants to eat bullets, eat on their own,” essentially suggesting Hezbollah puts its weapons above the basic needs of the Lebanese people.<sup>123</sup> Even a presenter for OTV, a network linked to President Michel Aoun with typically favorable coverage towards Hezbollah, asked a guest if the Lebanese people are paying the price for Hezbollah’s weapons and the related “economic siege.”<sup>124</sup>

In a more nuanced position, a lawyer and activist with the Popular Observatory for Fighting Corruption said his group did not participate in the demonstrations against Hezbollah’s arms and suggested calls for the group’s disarmament risk fragmenting the protest movement and emboldening sectarian parties.<sup>125</sup> Other activists also avoided the issue for similar reasons, which became a source of tension among various groups involved in the uprising. In a “National Salvation Conference” on October 25, 2020 attempting to unify these groups, the issue of Hezbollah’s weapons reportedly led to a dispute after some groups opposed putting the issue on the table.<sup>126</sup>

One of the most significant events that intensified critical discourse towards Hezbollah, alongside the rest of the political class, was the Beirut port explosion on August 4. The blast produced an onslaught of new criticism directed against Hezbollah, including accusations and insinuations that the party was connected to the ammonium nitrate or otherwise responsible for the blast. In an episode of *Sar El Wa2t*, Kataeb Party member Nadim Gemayel stated “there is only one person controlling the country - his name is Hassan Nasrallah” and claimed that Hezbollah is the one that decides whether someone can enter the port or not.<sup>127</sup> Famous Lebanese singer Elissa reposted a clip of an old speech by Nasrallah dating back to 2016 in which he suggests a rocket from the militia targeting the port of Haifa where ammonium is stored would create the result of a nuclear bomb that could kill tens of thousands. Elissa shared the video with the caption, “so you’re very happy with yourself, Sayyid?” the day after the explosion.<sup>128</sup>

In a video on the blast on August 16 entitled “the Conspiracy of Silence,” Megaphone News discussed Hezbollah’s partial control of the port and links to ammonium nitrate in other countries but specified this does not necessarily confirm the group’s involvement.<sup>129</sup> Still, Megaphone called the party “the foremost protector of the conspiracy of silence” as members of the ruling political class work to “exonerate” themselves. Nasrallah’s speech after the blast on August 7 in which he denied knowing about the ammonium nitrate at the port and suggested he knows more about Haifa port than Beirut’s port elicited significant backlash. Social media users juxtaposed pictures of Nasrallah smiling during the speech with those of him holding back tears over the killing of Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani.<sup>130</sup>

Other activists and groups involved in the uprising avoided placing direct blame on Hezbollah and instead focused their anger on the entire ruling political class, including Nasrallah among them. The first major demonstrations after the blast on August 8 highlighted the escalation in anger with the hanging of effigies of the various politicians, including Nasrallah, in Martyrs’ Square in Beirut as social media users circulated the hashtag #HangTheGallowsinTheSquares.<sup>131</sup><sup>132</sup> While chants during the protests were directed at multiple politicians and political parties, those directed at Hezbollah specifically included “terrorists, terrorists, Hezbollah are terrorists” and “all of them means all of them, Nasrallah is one of them.”<sup>133</sup> Some also chanted, “Beirut free free, Iran out out”<sup>134</sup> alongside those calling Hezbollah terrorists.<sup>135</sup> Blogger and activist Gino Raidy suggested Hezbollah was “cornered” after this moment and that “what was once taboo and banned, like talking about Nasrallah, is everywhere.”<sup>136</sup> The port explosion and its aftermath proved to be a defining moment in escalating public contempt and anger against the Lebanese government to a new level, as well as Hezbollah for its perceived role as protector of the ruling class following the October 17 uprising.

After the blast and the deterioration of both the health and economic situation in the country, alternative political parties and movements made more concentrated efforts to try to work together and challenge the political class. These so-called “pro-revolution” groups - who include parties like Citizens in a State (MMFD), Beirut Madinati, LiHaqqi, National Bloc, and Minteshreen - hold varying, but generally critical positions of Hezbollah stemming from their broader rejection of the sectarian political system. MMFD and leader Charbel Nahas, who was previously mentioned for drawing backlash over his comments about Hezbollah, have taken a more nuanced approach to the group, even including Hezbollah-linked individuals in some of their conversations on how to reform the country. In an interview conducted for this project, MMFD member Ibrahim Halawi said there is a key distinction between their approach versus other pro-revolution groups, stating “we start from the assumption that people who belong to Hezbollah are human beings.”<sup>137</sup> They see Hezbollah as a party produced by the sectarian system, much like the other sectarian parties, and understand there are legitimate reasons why people support the party and resistance. In terms of MMFD’s political platform, it includes a stated stance against Israel and avoids directly calling for the disarmament of Hezbollah, instead proposing an eventual transition to a national system or part of the military alongside the planned transition to a civilian state.<sup>138</sup>

The last major event examined in this study that influenced the opposition’s discourse towards Hezbollah was the assassination of intellectual and activist Louqman Slim on February 4, 2021. Hezbollah stands widely accused of carrying out the assassination. Slim was considered a prominent critic of Hezbollah and was himself a Shia from Beirut’s southern suburbs. He had previously received threats from Hezbollah and its supporters, some of whom called him a “traitor.” In her show on MTV called “Hakki Sadiq,” Dima Sadek directly accused Hezbollah of killing Louqman Slim alongside a biting critique of the group that drew backlash from the party and its supporters, prompting MTV to avoid re-airing the episode or posting it online. MTV Chairman Gabriel El-Murr issued a statement saying the network disagreed with the accusation presented without evidence and was not aware of the content in advance amid pressure against the network, which included the blocking of access to MTV in regions controlled by Hezbollah.<sup>139</sup><sup>140</sup> Political activist Dr. Mona Fayyad went on Marcel Ghanem’s Sar El Wa2t program and similarly accused Hezbollah of assassinating Slim but noted she did not have evidence.<sup>141</sup> She claimed the party did so out of fear and discussed Slim’s work documenting war crimes in Syria.

Reflecting on the assassination, a prominent activist from the uprising interviewed for this project called it a “lighting rod” for anger against Hezbollah and claimed the group is “theatrical” and chose the six-month anniversary of the Beirut port explosion to target Slim.<sup>142</sup> Instead of quieting the group’s critics, the activist stated it had the opposite effect, galvanizing further anger against Hezbollah. Research fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center Mohanad Hage Ali had a different take on the impact of the assassination, stating it will have a “freezing effect on freedom of expression” and “discourage others from speaking out against the powers that be in Lebanon.”<sup>143</sup> Joey Ayoub, an activist and PhD researcher at the University of Zurich, noted that intimidation, threats and violence still work and that if a group like Hezbollah feels it is cornered or has no cards to play, it is more likely to play the card of violence.<sup>144</sup>

With the widespread criticism that followed the assassination, Hezbollah convened meetings with other parties and media officials as part of the Parliamentary Media and Communications Committee that monitors Lebanese media.<sup>145</sup> The committee, designed to look into regulatory issues like licensing, is increasingly dealing with issues related to censorship. Lebanese analyst Bachar el-Halabi described this activity as “alarming,” noting how Hezbollah is twisting the arms of media executives to rein in criticism of the group.<sup>146</sup> He warned the committee’s activity could set a precedent and erode what is left of one of Lebanon’s last remaining characteristics that differentiates it from the rest of the region - freedom of speech.

In an Al-Modon article, journalist Qassem Marwani claimed Hezbollah has “no solution but to try to subjugate the Lebanese media” following repeated media campaigns against the party.<sup>147</sup> He said a large part of the Lebanese people have pointed their finger at the party for every issue the country is facing from

the suppression of the October 17 uprising, to the Beirut port blast, to the assassination of Slim. Marwani concluded, “it seems as if the image of Hezbollah in the minds of the Lebanese people has changed from a resistance that protects the country from the threat of Israel...to an organization responsible for all sabotage, killing and destruction.” These comments sum up the increasingly critical discourse towards Hezbollah from the October 17 uprising to the assassination of Slim and show how the group is looking to challenge this criticism through various methods following months of negative media and public criticism.

#### *5.4 Holding the Line*

While much of the public discourse examined thus far reflects an escalation in criticism of Hezbollah among both general supporters and opponents, much of the group’s base has remained loyal and defensive of Hezbollah through the series of events since the October 17 uprising. The reasons behind this loyalty vary and are in line with similar trends taking place among other sectarian parties who have maintained support in spite of the initial cross-sectarian mobilization and “all of them means all of them” chants at the outset of the uprising. Discourse among these supporters reflects coordinated efforts to adopt and bolster the party’s narratives in an attempt to reinforce sectarianism and challenge opponents. Tactics include the targeting of critics and opponents through social media exploitation and various media campaigns in support of the counter-revolution. The discourse also reflects those who support Hezbollah’s positions throughout these crises over their distrust of the protest movement and other sectarian parties, some of which points to class divides that will be explored in this section.

As previously mentioned, the October 17 uprising saw widespread participation among Hezbollah constituencies across southern Lebanon, the southern suburbs of Beirut, and the Beqaa Valley. However, Nasrallah’s first two speeches after the outbreak of protests and the reaction on the street proved to be a turning point for many of the party’s supporters. There was a clear withdrawal of Hezbollah supporters from the demonstrations after Nasrallah called on them to do so in his October 25 speech, although many remained in the streets. In Baalbek, some supporters who took part in the protests early on to demand socioeconomic relief and accountability still expressed support for the resistance and shielded Nasrallah from criticism, claiming he does not apply to the “all of them means all of them” chant.<sup>148</sup> Self-proclaimed supporters increasingly adopted rhetoric from Nasrallah’s October 25 speech, calling for organization to the popular movement so it is not exploited.

In terms of Hezbollah-aligned media, there were notable shifts in the way organizations and commentators covered the protests early on that reflect how Nasrallah’s first two speeches proved to be a turning point. After publishing an article describing the uprising as “a real opportunity for change,”<sup>149</sup> Al-Akhbar editor-in-chief Ibrahim Al-Amine shifted to adopt Nasrallah’s rhetoric from his first speech in an article on October 21 that described Hezbollah’s position as the last mediator and warned that the protest movement is threatened by opportunists, embassies and foreign powers.<sup>150</sup> In a starker contrast highlighting the change in coverage, the paper went from a cover with the headline “The people can” on October 18 to a cover with the headline “Lebanon is divided” on October 26 following Nasrallah’s second speech.<sup>151152153</sup> This shift contributed to the resignations of some journalists at the paper, as mentioned previously, in response to the paper’s evident turn on the protest movement in line with the rhetoric of Hezbollah.

In the early days, Hezbollah-backed Al-Manar and Al-Mayadeen both covered the demonstrations as they were occurring and featured some commentators explaining the demands for socioeconomic relief and anti-corruption reform. However, in line with Nasrallah’s rhetoric, their coverage shifted to focusing on repeating claims of the protest movement’s exploitation, foreign interference, and the risk of chaos. In a segment on October 27, Al Mayadeen noted how “Israeli media is following the protest movement with remarkable interest” and stated there is a “consensus that the current crisis in Lebanon serves the security interests of Israel.”<sup>154</sup> OTV, aligned with President Michel Aoun, carried similar segments claiming to expose foreign links to the protest movement.<sup>155</sup> Popular Al-Mayadeen correspondent Ali Mortada, who is active across

social media, posted a video on Twitter on October 26 commenting on anti-Nasrallah chants by students from the American University of Beirut's secular club during demonstrations in Beirut.<sup>156</sup> He reiterated sentiments shared by other supporters ridiculing the inclusion of Nasrallah in anti-government chants since he does not technically hold a political position in the country.

While Mortada's discourse was more mocking of the protesters, the sentiments were shared among supporters who felt alienated from the protests due to the presence of anti-Nasrallah and anti-Hezbollah rhetoric or fears of sectarian agendas among other protesters. One supporter quoted in an *Al-Modon* article expressed her disillusion with the protest movement, stating that people in Tariq al-Jdideh, a predominantly Sunni neighborhood in Beirut, chanted "all of them means all of them," but the last person for them who should resign is Saad Hariri.<sup>157</sup> She said this applies to all sects of Lebanon who refuse to give up their sectarian leaders. She suggested that many Hezbollah supporters were ready for change to fight corruption, but she no longer thinks it is possible due to these "spoilers." Dr. Denijal Jević noted the first few days of the protests were quite inclusive, but the atmosphere began to change with skepticism over the movement's demands and a notable class divide between those who could continue protesting and taking part in the public gatherings versus those whose economic reality made it difficult to stay in the streets, especially for a movement without clearly defined goals.<sup>158</sup> On top of these sentiments, the presence of perceived anti-Shia chants, alongside those critical of Hezbollah, Nasrallah, and Iran, alienated many within Hezbollah's base who initially took part in the uprising.

As the divide emerged after that first week and deepened in the following weeks and months, the discourse in the streets and online took on a much more sectarian nature by some of the party's supporters. In multiple instances, groups of Hezbollah and Amal supporters began carrying their parties' flags and chanting "Shia, Shia, Shia," while also attacking those taking part in protests related to the October 17 uprising.<sup>159</sup> There were several nights of tense standoffs in Beirut between protesters and supporters of the two parties, typically separated by security forces. In one of these incidents, a protester interviewed by BBC Arabic claimed they were responding to those that cursed out Nasrallah in Riad al-Solh square and defended both Nasrallah and Amal leader Nabih Berri, ending his comments with the "Shia" chant.<sup>160</sup> Another chant by Hezbollah and Amal supporters included, "the people want May 7"<sup>161</sup> playing on the popular Arab Spring chant and referring to the 2008 clashes in Beirut in which Hezbollah used its weapons against Lebanese national actors for the first time since the civil war.<sup>162</sup> Separately, several young men who had publicly criticized Nasrallah or Hezbollah were forced to issue public apologies for their statements that praised the party and the resistance following apparent intimidation.<sup>163</sup> These incidents underscore the use of sectarian rhetoric, violence, and intimidation to challenge the critical discourse towards Hezbollah and defend the party in an attempt to reinforce sectarianism.

In terms of the financial crisis, Hezbollah mobilized its alliance of media institutions and supporters to launch new initiatives painting the party as supportive of the population, as well as efforts to project strength amid the instability. With the onset of the financial crisis, videos circulated on social media and WhatsApp purporting to show large stacks of dollars received by Hezbollah that demonstrated its continued ability to pay employees in dollars, despite the emerging dollar shortage.<sup>164</sup> As the financial crisis deepened and politicians increasingly discussed the possibility of a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the party's supporters sought to paint the party as rejecting the neoliberal institution and ensuring the interests of the Lebanese population, despite Nasrallah's role in allowing talks with the IMF to proceed. An *Al-Akhbar* article on February 24, 2020 entitled "Hezbollah and Amal: No to the Guardianship of the IMF" claimed the two parties refused "the country's subjection to the IMF's terms."<sup>165</sup> After it was clear that talks with the IMF would happen, an *Al-Akhbar* article on March 31 defended claims that Hezbollah allowed for cooperation with the IMF, stating the party "does not oppose the principle of negotiation, but it will inevitably oppose the harsh conditions imposed by the IMF."<sup>166</sup> These articles reflect an effort to justify or explain Hezbollah's decision not to outright reject IMF cooperation, despite its claimed stance against the fund's neoliberal policies.



To counter economic anxiety, Nasrallah declared an “agricultural and industrial jihad” on July 7, 2020 with the stated goals of confronting the economic crisis and US sanctions. The campaign was launched with various propaganda videos encouraging people to grow their own fruit and vegetables on their balconies. While opponents of Hezbollah mocked the group for the effort, some supporters took pride in the campaign as a way to achieve self-sufficiency in the face of pressure and revive Lebanon’s domestic industries, particularly the agricultural sector which has a long and celebrated history in the country. Dr. Denijal Jegić suggested the initiative was welcomed by many people as a challenge to “the neoliberal economic system imposed by the Hariri dynasties.”<sup>167</sup> This strategy was amplified by videos produced to promote the effort, various news segments, and documentaries painting the jihad as the party’s resistance to “the US war on Hezbollah.”<sup>168169170</sup> The campaign builds on previous rhetorical calls to transform the agricultural sector in Lebanon, but notably, Hezbollah has not used its presence in the government to change agricultural policies or reverse the industry’s decline, even though it controlled the Ministry of Agriculture between 2009 and 2014.<sup>171</sup>

Another strategy used to promote a more positive discourse towards Hezbollah was the party’s COVID-19 efforts and associated media campaigns. Following the initial outbreak, Hezbollah hosted a media tour on March 31 of its preparations to address the virus in Beirut’s southern suburbs, boasting its health workers and several centers devoted to handling COVID-19 patients. Member of Parliament Hassan Fadlallah organized a press conference in conjunction with the media tour to highlight the party’s efforts, which was promoted by the party’s base online.<sup>172</sup>

Fadlallah also sought to portray Hezbollah as the leader of an anti-corruption campaign with a presentation of so-called “corruption files” involving the government in May 2020. He hosted a press conference noting the campaign launched by Nasrallah in 2018 to crack down on corruption in the public sector. Fadlallah called the war against corruption “more difficult than the war with the Israeli enemy” and proceeded to break down annual waste in various sectors. Twitter users boosted the campaign under the hashtag #ResistanceAgainstCorruption,<sup>173</sup> contributing to perceptions of the party’s commitment to an anti-corruption platform despite criticism of its alliances with parties accused of corruption.<sup>174</sup> In reality, the presentation of the files did not name specific individuals or contribute to any meaningful effort to hold ministries and officials responsible for corruption.

When it comes to the status of Hezbollah’s weapons, many supporters view the issue as a “red line” and thus, from the outset of the uprising, mobilized to defend the party’s arms and the broader “resistance.” In an Al-Mayadeen article, author Rania Khalek, who holds favorable views towards Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, suggested chants in favor of disarming Hezbollah during the initial uprising alienated supporters, claiming, “For Hezbollah’s supporters, this rhetoric is a call for the total destruction of their movement.”<sup>175</sup> In a clip from MTV’s Sar El Wa2t talk show, an audience member named Tariq from southern Lebanon addressed Kataeb leader Samy Gemayel and criticized him for constantly bringing up the issue of Hezbollah’s weapons.<sup>176</sup> He refuted claims that the weapons cost Lebanon \$100 million and denied that they were ever used except as a response to a threat. In response to demonstrations supported by Gemayel against Hezbollah’s weapons in May and June 2020, supporters of the party criticized Gemayel and noted the need for Hezbollah’s weapons to defend against Israel, while Al-Mayadeen correspondent Ali Mortada mocked the demonstrations on Twitter.<sup>177178</sup> An Al-Akhbar article referred to the protesters as “embassy revolutionaries,” suggesting the Americans decided it is time to address the issue after protesters initially avoided bringing up Hezbollah’s weapons in the first months of the protest movement.<sup>179</sup> These are just several of many examples in which Hezbollah supporters defended the group’s arms, which has long been a polarizing issue in Lebanese politics and society.

In the online space, social media has become a battleground where both legitimate users and social media “trolls” amplify pro-Hezbollah and Nasrallah hashtags and attack prominent critics of the group. In the

example mentioned earlier, TV host Dima Sadek received online harassment, threatening messages, and hashtags directed against her for the war of words between her and a prominent Shia cleric in the south after her phone was stolen, allegedly by a Hezbollah supporter.<sup>180</sup> Harassment against Sadek escalated throughout the uprising, as well as targeted harassment against other Lebanese journalists who voiced criticism against the group. Journalist Luna Safwan experienced cyberbullying and accusations of being an Israeli agent after an Israeli channel circulated a tweet of hers critical of the party.<sup>181</sup> Kassem Kassir received similar online backlash and harassment from supporters of Hezbollah following his interview with NBN in which he suggested the party should focus more on Lebanon than its relationship with Iran and regional activities, as mentioned in the previous section.<sup>182</sup> The coordinated online attacks demonstrate Hezbollah's exploitation of the online space to silence and intimidate critics of the group, while defending the party online to challenge competing narratives.

The last major trend in the discourse worth addressing is the idea of media wars and Hezbollah supporters' opposition to mainstream media for their "obsession" with Hezbollah. This was particularly evident in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion on August 4 and the decision by some supporters to boycott news stations like LBC and MTV for what they viewed as unfair accusations against Hezbollah for the blast.<sup>183</sup> Al-Akhbar similarly characterized MTV as spearheading "the war on resistance" over the decision by some networks not to air Nasrallah's speech after the explosion.<sup>184</sup> The assassination of Louqman Slim was another area where supporters felt the Lebanese media was unfairly blaming the party for the incident without evidence. Pro-Hezbollah commentator Hosam Matar described a "media battle between the resistance and its opponents," stating "we are not angels, but we are facing a legendary demonization campaign."<sup>185</sup> Dr. Denijal Jegić described the broader sentiment among many supporters that there is a tendency to blame each individual incident that happens in Lebanon on the party.<sup>186</sup> Its supporters have used this argument to discredit criticism and deflect blame for incidents like Slim's assassination amid mounting pressure and scrutiny from other segments of the Lebanese population.

### *5.5 Analyzing the Trends*

Examples from the discourse mentioned above highlight two diverging trends in attitudes towards Hezbollah: one of escalating skepticism and criticism from some of the party's supporters and its opponents versus those defending the party and pushing its narratives throughout Lebanon's series of crises. These trends are in line with a broader polarization within Lebanese society of those who have become increasingly disillusioned with the sectarian political system and are seeking real change, as opposed to those who have doubled down on their loyalties to sectarian parties and leaders in the face of Lebanon's instability, particularly as the crises drag on and worsen. For Hezbollah, the discourse points to its clear position as defender of the ruling political class and sectarian system, rather than the marginalized and oppressed it claims to represent. These inherent tensions are becoming more problematic for many of the party's supporters, a trend that is likely to undermine the party's political support. At the same time, hardline supporters continue to buy into Hezbollah's rhetoric and defend the group against challengers, reflecting the hold that sectarian politics continues to have on many Lebanese citizens.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

In examining political and public discourse towards Hezbollah since the October 17 uprising, it is evident that there are widening tensions with Hezbollah's position in Lebanon, as well as the broader sectarian political system and neoliberal economy. Hezbollah has gone from outright rejecting the Lebanese sectarian system upon its establishment in 1985 to serving as the dominant political force upholding this system in the face of arguably its greatest challenge since the civil war. This shift is the result of years of the party's gradual expansion into Lebanese politics and government that have exposed greater contradictions within Hezbollah's ideology and relationship with its base. Its founding ideology of resistance, social justice, and challenging oppression appealed to many Lebanese, even outside the Shia sect, but in practice and over time, Hezbollah's actions have served to undermine these ideals and reproduce sectarian divisions, seen in its reaction to the October 17 uprising that cemented Hezbollah's position as a key part of the political establishment, rather than the "oppressed" it claims to represent.

The discourse shows how more of Hezbollah's base and allies have started to understand and take issue with these contradictions, seen in the surprise by some that the party would turn so swiftly against the protest movement, despite the demands for socioeconomic relief, anti-corruption reform, and an end to political sectarianism – all demands that the party has backed in rhetoric. The most pressing concern, however, is Lebanon's socioeconomic deterioration that is being deeply felt by much of the population, including within Hezbollah's constituencies in areas that have long experienced inequality, such as the south and the Bekaa. The economic situation has driven a sense of abandonment and discontent with the party by many who no longer perceive Hezbollah as the party of the poor as it has claimed to be in the past. Alongside the party's political evolution, it has become more entrenched in Lebanon's neoliberal economic system that caters far more to the expanded Shia bourgeoisie than the working class. Lebanon's economic deterioration has only sharpened inequalities and contributed to a growing recognition of Hezbollah's hypocrisy, especially when it comes to economic policies. At the same time, socioeconomic deterioration and instability has the power to strengthen sectarian loyalties by deepening a reliance on Hezbollah's network of social and financial services.

While the discourse analysis noted multiple examples of internal criticism of Hezbollah, this does not necessarily translate into a loss of political support or weakening of the party. Measuring support is a difficult task and not a goal of this project, but what is evident is a greater willingness to question and criticize Hezbollah and its actions from multiple segments of Lebanese society, including the party's constituents. Hezbollah views such criticism as an inherent threat, which explains the often-harsh reaction to those critical of the party via a widening array of tactics such as physical threats, online harassment, and rhetorical intimidation. The assassination of Louqman Slim, which Hezbollah is widely suspected of carrying out, was likely an attempt to remind those within the community of the potential costs of speaking out. Activist and researcher Joey Ayoub noted that Hezbollah is used to having hegemony over its constituencies but has clearly lost some of its control, even prior to the October 17 uprising with cracks appearing over the intervention in Syria, the party's opposition to previous protest movements, and the lack of economic policies promoting development.<sup>187</sup>

Among opponents, who have long been critical of Hezbollah, the October 17 uprising and its aftermath drove an escalation in criticism against the party, largely due to rising public discontent against the ruling political class, which the party, and importantly Hassan Nasrallah, are clearly viewed as being a part of. More importantly, the party is viewed as leading the counter-revolution, in part due to its stronger political and financial position relative to the other parties. Political opportunists have exploited the uprising and scrutiny of the government to target Hezbollah and try to blame the party for every successive crisis that Lebanon has faced, driven in part by sectarianism and efforts to deflect blame against themselves or their interests – particularly in the banking sector. Pressure continues to grow against the party, seen in a rally

held by Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rai on February 27 calling for Lebanon's neutrality in regional conflicts in an obvious challenge to Hezbollah.

While all of the criticism is notable, a significant part of the discourse towards Hezbollah is defined by supporters who continue to defend the party and the broader "resistance," largely out of sectarian loyalty. Nasrallah and the party still maintain a loyal base that is ready to defend and reinforce the party's positions, boosted by media platforms like Al-Manar and Al-Mayadeen, as well as social media influencers and "electronic militias." For many supporters, the lack of any credible political alternative and fears of instability have driven continued loyalty to the party, as well as members of other sects who have also gone back to their sectarian camps despite the anti-sectarian nature of the start of the uprising.

In some ways, this study of discourse and attitudes towards Hezbollah can be used as a case study to be applied to other sectarian parties because it reflects broader tensions with the ruling political class and sectarian system. Much of the internal dynamics are happening against other parties as part of this rejection of politicians for their role in the financial crisis, the deterioration in living conditions, the Beirut port explosion, and the health crisis brought on by COVID-19, among other issues. Broader political frustrations and strain among supporters are impacting all establishment parties, made possible by the October 17 uprising and the "all of them means all of them" discourse. However, Hezbollah's position as the only militia to remain armed after the civil war, its financial and military support from Iran, and its regional activity make it unique in terms of the challenges and scrutiny it faces and the power it holds compared to other parties.

Building on this analysis of the wider dynamics at play, trends in the discourse towards Hezbollah reveal greater tensions with Lebanon's political and economic system. The uprising has led to more calls than ever for reform through the expanded mobilization of alternative political parties and the creation of new movements in favor of a civil state. The activity of these groups includes efforts to supplant clientelist networks with grassroots organizing. Socioeconomic realities, however, have limited the possibilities and forced many members of these movements to leave the country, while making political organization a luxury that only a small minority of the population can enjoy amid Lebanon's unprecedented crises. Additionally, the nature of the sectarian political system, which remains wholly intact, makes it extremely difficult to mobilize along anything but sect, which is why the system of consociational power-sharing is inherently counter-revolutionary.<sup>188</sup> The system and its penetration into the economy ensures sectarianism's "hegemony" over society, as described by Dr. Bassel Salloukh.<sup>189</sup>

The prospect of a politically viable, cross-sectarian movement against the Lebanese system poses an existential threat to Hezbollah and the other sectarian parties and thus explains their efforts to mobilize the counter-revolution to ensure the movement did not become politically viable. The lack of organization of the protest movement, the political class' ability to reinforce sectarianism among their camps, and factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic made it relatively easy for the ruling political class to challenge and break the protest movement, although it remains ongoing in some form today. The country's impending economic collapse, however, may pose a greater threat. Parties are already preparing to address a likely escalation in social instability with attempts to control the street, seen in the response to the protests in Tripoli in January 2021 and wider unrest following the accelerated collapse of the lira in March 2021. The hope that emerged in the October 17 uprising is largely gone, and the ruling political class remains defiant, leading the country into what can only be described as an abyss as they hold onto power and uphold the sectarian political system.

## End Notes

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